

# AL-HĀRITH IBN ASAD AL-MUHĀSIBI

(d. 243/857)

## *EXCERPTS FROM HIS WORKS\**

Translated by

MARGARET SMITH<sup>1</sup>

---

\* The underlined passages are paraphrases of al-Muhāsibī's text done by the translator M. Smith.  
[Section titles added].

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Margaret: *An early mystic of Baghdad: a study of the life and teaching of Harith B. Asad al-Muhasibi, A.D. 781-A.D. 857*. London: Sheldon, 1935 (rept. 1973).

**1.**  
[The Search]

“For a long period of my life I did not cease to consider the schisms in the community (of Islam) and to seek the right road and the way to be followed, knowledge supported by the general consensus and a practical rule of life, and I sought for guidance on spiritual things from the theologians. I studied the Word of God long and thoughtfully, with the allegorical interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of the jurisconsults, and I considered the different sects of the community and their sayings, and selected there from what I could; and I saw their controversies to be like a deep sea, in which many have been overwhelmed, and from which only few chosen ones have been delivered. I observed that every section of them asserted that salvation consisted in following them, and the perdition was the result of differing from them. Among all those belonging to the sects, it is rare to meet with one who has real knowledge of spiritual things.

Among their adherents is the ignorant man, and to be far from him is good fortune. Another is the man who apes the theologians, but is really a worldling. Then there is that one who relies upon knowledge of religion without possessing religious convictions, who seeks to be highly esteemed because of his knowledge, and to have the status of a religious man in this world. Another is the one who is possessed of knowledge, but is unable to interpret it, and another is he who imitates the devout (*nussāk*), seeking benefit for himself, but he has no independence and no power of insight and his opinion is not to be relied upon. Another type is the man who depends upon reason and worldly wisdom, but is lacking in piety and the fear of God. Then there are those who follow after lust and agree thereto, and these care only for this world and for the power it gives. There are also those Satans among mankind, who shrink from the thought of the next life and attach themselves to this world and seek to gain all they can from it, and in truth they are alive unto this present world and dead unto the heavenly places; indeed, they know nothing of Heaven, but with Hell they are well acquainted.

So I searched among these types to find myself, and I was unable to do so; therefore I betook myself to those who were rightly guided (فقصدت إلى هدى المهتدين), and sought guidance from learning and made use of meditation, and after long consideration it was made clear to me, through the Word of God, and the *Sunna* of His Prophet, and the consensus of opinion of the faithful (*ijmāʿ*), that following after passion makes a man blind to the true path, and leads him astray from the Truth, and through his blindness he is long delayed.

[Islām]

So I began by casting passion out of my heart, and I considered the schisms in the community, desiring to seek that sect which would shew me the way to salvation, while avoiding destructive lusts and that sect which leads to perdition, and I was careful not to come to a hasty conclusion without proof, and thus I sought the way of salvation for my own soul. Then I found that the way of salvation consists in cleaving to the fear of God (التمسك بتقوى الله), and the fulfillment of what He has ordained (*farāʿid*), and scrupulous observance (*waraʿ*) of what He has made lawful and unlawful and all His canonical sanctions (*hudūd*) and the service of God for His own sake alone (*ikhhlās*), and in taking His Apostle as a model.

So I sought for knowledge of these things from those who held fast to God's command and the *Sunna*, and I found that those who were worthy of imitation were rare, and my difficulties were increased by the lack of God-fearing guides, and I feared greatly lest death should cut short my life, through my anguish on account of the schisms among the faithful, and I exerted myself in the search for what I had not found for myself of Divine knowledge, and the All-Compassionate gave me guidance from those in whom I found indications of devoted piety, of abstinence, and of preference for the next world over this.

### [Models of Salvation]

I found that their directions and their maxims were in agreement with the advice of the Imāms of the Way of Salvation, that they were agreed upon giving good advice to the community, not giving to any freedom to sin, yet not despairing of the Divine mercy towards any sinner, recommending patience in misfortune and adversities, and acquiescence in the Divine Will, and gratitude for favours received. They seek to make God loved by His servants, in reminding them of His favours and His loving-kindness and in calling upon the faithful to repent unto God. Such persons are wise in knowledge of the majesty of God, and the greatness of His power, learned in His word and in His law, well acquainted with the true faith, knowing well what is to be loved and what hated, scrupulous in the matter of heresies and sensual desires, avoiding prolixity and exaggeration and all personal faults, relying upon themselves, without having recourse to others, wise in their knowledge of the next life and of what is to be feared at the resurrection from the dead, of God's generosity in reward and His severity in punishment. God has made them to grieve continually with a special concern, by means of which they are kept from preoccupation with the pleasures of this world, and guard their piety by the canonical sanctions. I realised that the cult of the true faith and sincerity in God's service were as a deep sea, and one like myself could not be saved from sinking therein, and could not abide within those sanctions; but these men I knew to be treading the way of salvation, imitators of the Apostles and the Prophets, being lanterns to those who seek illumination, and leaders for those who need guidance. (التأسون بالمرسلين،

والمصاييح لمن استضاء بهم، والهادون لمن استرشد)

### [The Spiritual Vision]

Desirous of following their rule of life, and having learned much from their gifts, being full of admiration for their obedience to the law of God, I saw that no further proof was needed for one who had grasped the argument. I realised that to adopt this way of life and to act in accordance with it was incumbent upon me. I pledged myself to it in my

inmost self, and I concentrated on it with my spiritual vision. I made it the foundation of my faith, and I based my acts upon it in all circumstances while asking God to incite me to gratitude for what He had bestowed on me, and to strengthen me to observe the sanctions which He had made known to me.” (pp. 18-20)

## 2.

### [Purification of the Self]

The first thing is that you should know that you are a servant under authority, for whom there is no salvation except through fearing your Master and Lord, and no destruction for you if you do so. Therefore remember and reflect upon that for which you were created and the reason for which you were placed in this transient world, and know that you were not created for idle pleasure (*‘abth*) and you were not abandoned to blindness (i.e., not left without guidance), but you were created and placed in this world only by way of trial and experience, either to obey God or to disobey Him, and you will pass from this world into everlasting torment or eternal bliss. If you know that you are a servant under authority, you will understand why you were created and to what you are exposed and to what you are inevitably taking your way. That is the very beginning of the purification of your self, for it cannot be purified unless it knows itself to be under authority and a creature, and then you will know that there can be no salvation for one who is but a creature and in state of servanthship, except through obedience to his Lord and Master. The guide to that obedience is knowledge of His commands and prohibitions, for obedience is the road to salvation, and knowledge is the guide to the road, and the foundation of obedience is abstinence (*wara’*), and the foundation of abstinence is godliness (*taqwā*), and the foundation of that is self-examination (*muhāsaba*), and self-examination is based on fear (*khawf*) and hope (*rajā’*), and that which guides to self-examination is the knowledge which enables God’s creatures to serve Him with their hearts and members.” (pp. 111-112)

### 3.

#### [Intention, *Niyya*]

“One of the ‘gates’ between God and man, by which he is led into the knowledge of Divine things, is the gate of the intention and its purification, which leads to the will to do good in secret and openly, in things great and small. The essential part of action is the intention, which must be free from all tinge of hypocrisy and all self-interested motives; otherwise the action is of no value.” (p. 105)

“Do not strive for outward devotion (*‘ibāda*) while your intention is corrupt and your will infirm, for your obedience will be changed altogether into disobedience, and punishment will come upon you in this world, together with chastisement in the world to come, with much weariness of the flesh and little profit and the loss of desires and delights, and you will perish in this world and the next. But adorn your service with piety and single-minded devotion and abstinence, and your intention with sincerity, and guard your desire by self-examination and concern yourself with the search for (a good) intention. Determine to seek sincerity in speech and in action and in all your states, in your service to God and in abandonment of sin, until you are as sure of your intention as of your action.” (p. 108)

“Purify your intention for therein consists your well-being in the next life and in this also; it is a covenant made with God, and you will attain to nothing except by means of it, and will be your salvation from all that makes for destruction. It is that which links you with God the All-Powerful, Who willed before you directed your intention. Determination lies in the intention, and no door is opened to you, nor does any spirit attain to God, nor is any knowledge of Him acquired, except by this means.” “Then take heed to your intention, for it is a secret bond between you and God, and in it resides single-mindedness and sincerity in speech and in action within the heart. Therefore do nothing without a rightly directed intention, and do not either eat or drink or speak or observe without a good purpose, and know that God has had mercy on you, when your intention is good and free from defect.

Most of Mankind have striven to do different kinds of service to God, without a rightly directed purpose, and intention can be directed only by knowledge, and knowledge can be attained only by the intention, and neither can dispense with the other. Therefore strive to direct your intention aright, for hereby you will attain to virtue and to single-mindedness, and it is the abode of awe and reverence and godly fear and caution and wariness and the love of God. So direct your intention that it may be pure from all defects and fair to behold, and thus you will attain to your goal.” (pp. 108-109)

#### 4.

#### [Hypocrisy, *Riyā'*]

“*Riyā'* (hypocrisy), is, of course, one of the ‘secret sins’ of the heart, and often the sinner is self-deluded and hardly realizes his hypocrisy. Hypocrisy means that the state of the heart, in its intention and desires, does not correspond to the virtue of the outward act; it is the desire for something beside God, in serving Him, and the desire to gain something from men by that service to God. It is to do an action, outwardly for the glory of God, but with the intension of having glory of men.”

“The Prophet had said: ‘the thing most to be feared for my community is hypocrisy and secret desire.’ If a man is not heedful of the direction of his secret desires, they will corrupt his service of God.”

“Wahb b. Munnabih had said: “Secret desires in the heart are like a secret fire in the midst of a pile of aloes wood; if the wood is perforated, the fire will be revealed, and if the wood is left untouched, the fire remains hidden. Hypocrisy, in its most open form, is falsehood, and in its most hidden form it is guile. It is hidden from him who is neglectful and is manifest to him who searches for it with understanding knowledge, and he who knows the gravity of his need of it cleaves to sincerity, out of fear of hypocrisy.” (pp. 132-133)

## 5.

### [Knowledge]

“Knowledge is to the mind as a lamp to the eye, and as the light of the sun to the sight. Knowledge was given to man by God, so that his reason, making use thereof, might enable him to realize how the darkness of ignorance veils him from the remembrance of the next world and the regard of his Lord upon him. Reason is like the eye which seeks help from the lamp knowing what is the result of darkness. So the wise servant strives with his intellect to make use of knowledge and to act in accordance with it, and so to ward off the sinful suggestions of the self and the Adversary.” (p. 100)

“The best of men are those who live nearest to God, and those who are nearest to Him are those who know Him best. Men attain to excellence in proportion to their knowledge (*ma'rifa*). They serve God for His own sake alone, according to their knowledge of Him. They are convinced of the truth of His promises and humble themselves before Him, in proportion to their knowledge; and whether what they do and what they say is right depends upon their knowledge. They are satisfied with God and are acquiescent in His will and trust to Him in all their affairs according to their knowledge of Him. They thank God for His grace and place their hope in Him and fear Him, in accordance with what they know of Him. It is understanding knowledge which leads them to right thoughts of Him and gives them patience to obey Him and refrain from disobeying Him, and to conceal their service to Him and to endure the afflictions which come upon them by His decree, which makes them love what is dear to Him and hate what is abhorrent to Him.” (p. 103)

“The hungry man desires bread and the thirsty man desires water, and if bread and water are placed before them it does not profit them to be aware that bread and water are there, and the proximity of bread is of no use to them unless they eat of food and drink of the water. So also is it with you: your knowledge of good and its proximity to you does not benefit you, nor your desire for it, until it becomes a part of your very self and you become one of those who follow after it.” (p. 104)



## 6.

### [Actions of the Heart]

“God only desires their hearts from His servants and their members will follow their hearts. But while the actions of the members - (*a‘māl al-jawāriḥ*), the outward conduct - are under the ultimate control of the heart, which may direct them towards evil or good, there are also ‘actions of the heart’ (*a‘māl al-qulūb*), including the motives and sources of the outward actions, the cognitive, emotional and volitional processes, the exercise of the virtues and vices, the reception of the psychological ‘states’ (*ahwāl*) and the attainment of the mystic ‘stations’ (*maqāmāt*).

The heart has ‘hearing,’ by which it may listen to the Voice of God and also to the ‘whisperings’ of Satan, and it has sight, the ‘eye’ by which it has power to contemplate spiritual realities, when it is enlightened, and may be blind to them, when it is dimmed by the darkness of lust.

The heart is the ‘(origin) of all things,’ according to the word of the Prophet: “Within man there is a fleshy fragment, and when it is corrupt the body is corrupt and when it is sound the body is sound. Is it not the heart?” (pp. 87-88)

## 7.

### [The Appetitive Self]

Of the appetitive self (*al-naḥs al-ammāra*) al-Muhāsibī writes:

“Place it where God Almighty placed it as He has described it and withstand it according to His command, for it is a greater enemy to you than Satan (*Iblīs*) himself, and *Iblīs* gains power over you only by means of it and your consent to it. You know to what it calls you and that it was created weak, though its nature is strong in greed and dissimulation, for it is self-confident, self-assertive, disobedient to God, untrustworthy. Its sincerity consists in lying, its claims are based on vanity; all that comes from it is deceitful, nothing that it does is praiseworthy.

Be not deluded by the self and its desires, for if you leave it alone, you are led astray, and if you give it what it desires, you will perish. If you neglect to examine it, you will fall under its control, and if you weaken in your struggles against it, you will be overwhelmed, and if you follow it in its desires, you will end up in Hell. The truth is not in it, nor any tendency to good; it is the source of affliction and the origin of all evil and the treasure-house of *Iblīs*. None knows it save its Creator --- what it displays as fear is really self-confidence, and what it displays as sincerity is only falsehood, and its claim to be single-minded in the service of God is pure hypocrisy.” (pp. 90-91)

## **8.**

### **[Fear]**

“The danger is great and the body is weak, and death is nigh at hand, and the regard of God is upon you, and nothing that you do is hidden from Him, whether it be done openly or in secret. You cannot endure His wrath, and you have no strength to bear His chastisement, and you are unable to dispense with His presence; therefore take care in regard to yourself before the time comes to meet with Him.” (p. 96)

“Fear is indispensable to the heart, but it does not rise up until the desire to sin has wholly died within man, and faith has been established by the intensity of fear. What afflicts the servants of God is their fear of the loss of God’s good pleasure, and His disapproval of them, and this is more to them and more painful to their hearts than the loss of Paradise and the fear of Hell.” (p. 97)

## **9.**

### **[The Word of Sin]**

“I have found the origin of what is inimical to the spiritual life to come, the most far-reaching of the stratagems of Satan in corrupting the faithful and destroying the sanctions of religion, to be the love of this world and exaltation and glory therein. It is the root of evil and the chief of sins, and because of it God’s creatures are remiss in what is

due to Him, and go astray from His law, and neglect prayer and fasting and the rest of the ordinances, and, through love of wealth and reputation, they are enticed by the seductions of what is unlawful and sinful, and despise much of what is in accordance with the Divine command and purpose. For the sake of this world, they disobey God and fall into mortal sin, and bring themselves to perdition unawares. The Prophet of God warned them of the seductions of this world, for he said: “After my time worldliness shall come upon you, and it shall consume your faith, as fire consumes the fuel.” He also had said: “There is nothing more abhorrent to God, after polytheism, than the love of this world.” (pp. 114-115)

“He who loves this world and its pleasures casts out the fear of the next from his heart. While you rejoice in what you gain from this world, you have lost the fear of God Most High. Yes, and perhaps you are so satisfied with your life of worldliness that your care for spiritual things has grown weak, and it may be that the burden of your sins is lighter upon you than your affliction from worldly loss. Yes, and your fear of the diminution of your wealth is twice as great as your fear of committing sin. It may be that you give away to others what you have amassed by unlawful means, in order to obtain exaltation and reputation in this world, and perhaps you are satisfied with the creatures, when God is dissatisfied with them, in order that you may be reckoned good and gain position and advantage.” (pp. 116-117)

“Know, O my brother that sins produce heedlessness (*ghafla*)- that is, the sinner is forgetful of God and his law- and heedlessness produces hardness of heart, and hardness of hearts leads to alienation from God, and alienation from God leads to Hell.” (p. 129)

“There is hardly a day in a man’s life, he feels, in which he is not guilty of some sin of commission, of the ‘members’ or the heart, and outward piety is no proof of freedom from sin. Most of the devout men of our time are heedless, self-deluded. We reckon ourselves among those who lead an austere and pious life, and it may be that in the sight of God we are among the wicked and sinners. How can we believe that we are righteous, when not a day comes upon us but we purpose fresh sins, which we have not

committed before, and we add them to our past sins, sins of the members and sins of the heart, pride and envy and malevolence and evil supposition and other sins beside? Every day of our lives we add new sins to the sins of yesterday, and increase our liability to judgment. The very first sin which we commit, consciously and deliberately, renders us guilty in the sight of God, and every sin committed thereafter increases our guilt. Then, O my brother, let godliness (*taqwā*) be your chief concern, for it is your capital stock, and works of supererogation beyond that represent your profit. There is no merchant so heedless, nor any man wise and sound in judgment, who reckons that he has made a profit, without having secured his capital.” (p. 129)

“You will not attain (to the conquest of sin) except by a sound purpose and a firm Intention to combat desire, and by controlling your inward self, for if the servant controls his inward self, he dominates his members and has knowledge of his own heart, and self-examination and other means of opposing the self in what she desires become easy to him, by the leave of God Most High; but if you lose control of your inward self, God’s command will seem hard to you, and your members will go astray and your heart will be lost, and you will not be aware of it, and will find yourself unfit for self-examination. Then keep to what is lawful, control your tongue except in what will aid you in approaching God Most High, guard also your hearing and your sight and consider in what you sin and for what you sin.” (pp. 131- 132)

“Fear the sins of the heart, and search out its hidden faults and the basic principles of its sins, and the evil of its inmost parts and subtleties of its sensual desires and the secrets of its lusts, then strive to expel what is opposed to the good pleasure of God Most High from your hearts, for when you delivered from the sins of the heart, then you are saved from the punishment of God Most High.” (p. 132)

### [*Ināya and Minna (Grace)*]

“[Mortification] was his path, and God it was Who appointed it for the seeker (*murīd*), for the training of his soul. There is no asceticism on the part of man who is ignorant of the high station of the seeker who is preoccupied with his Lord, who is seen to be thinking little of this world, humble, fearful, sorrowful, weeping, shewing a meek spirit, keeping far from the children of this world, suffering oppression, not seeking revenge, despoiled yet not desiring requital, disheveled, dusty, shabby, thinking little of what he wears, wounded, alone, a stranger — but if the ignorant man were to look upon the heart of the seeker, and see how God has fulfilled in him what He promised of His favour, and what He gives him in exchange for that which he renounced of the vainglory of this world and its pleasure, he would desire to be in his place, and would realize that it is he, the seeker after God, who is truly rich and fair to look upon, who tastes delight, who is joyous, happy, for he has attained his desire, and has secured that which he sought from his Lord.” (pp. 176-177)

“These are the qualities produced by the fight waged against the self by those who practice self-examination, those who resolutely set themselves in opposition to the self and mortify it with the help of God. They attain to a high and honourable station, for all things depend upon strength of purpose, and to him who has strengthened his purpose the struggle against the lusts becomes easy, by the help of God Most High, and he will not have long to wait before the Divine grace is revealed within his heart.” (p. 177)

“Nothing is more hard upon impurity than light, but the light is only an illumination to the heart if the servant is awake and alive to it, but when he is neglectful he dies and is in darkness, and his light is extinguished; and nothing is more pleasing to *Iblīs* than the darkness of the heart and its blackness and the extinction of its light. For nothing is more grievous to impurity than light and whiteness. Freedom from defilement, and purity, and evil can find no resting-place in the radiance of light.” (p. 179)

“All good things, whether of action or through will, come from the grace of Him from Whom,” “all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed.” (p. 181)

*“The help given (ināya) to enable us to return to Him is one of the greatest gifts of God. ... When God warns his servant and arouses him to caution, he realises that it is by the favour (minna) of God, and that his soul is thereby healed.”* (p. 181)